The scroll of Ruth re-told through librettos and music: biblical interpretation in a new key

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The text on the preceding pages, the Scroll of Ruth, has inspired many composers to set it to music. In this thesis, I treat musical settings of the entire Scroll, but these works for the most part are not well known. There are settings of only parts of the Scroll by more well-known composers, and I am starting with a composer who set some of the most familiar passages in the Scroll of Ruth. As an introduction to the idea of “the Scroll re-told through librettos and music,” I will briefly discuss a very short and beautiful work that was not included in this thesis because of its brevity. I am including it here because of the importance of this prominent 20th-century composer, and its availability on CD.¹ This cantata, however, cannot be considered a full musical interpretation of Ruth of the kind treated in this thesis.

The short cantata Naomi and Ruth (op. 137, 1949), a musical setting of Ruth 1.1-17 (in Italian and English, KJV) by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1895-1968), is a significant work by an important 20th-century composer. The Bible was an inspiration to Castelnuovo-Tedesco, an Italian Jew, throughout his life. He was inspired not only by the narratives, but by “the Jewish spiritual and liturgical heritage that had accumulated from and been inspired by it over the centuries” (Levin, 5). In addition to biblical oratorios and cantatas, Castelnuovo-Tedesco also wrote other short choral works based on the Bible, such as the Lament of David and Proverbs of Solomon (Rossi, ii). Naomi and Ruth was his first nonliturgical biblical choral work.²

In Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s 11-minute setting, the only soloist is Naomi, a soprano. This is consistent with the title, which places Naomi’s name before Ruth’s. This casting is interesting since the norm is to cast Naomi as a lower voice, depicting age and or authority (ch. 6, p. 104). Ruth’s part is taken by the chorus, because the composer thought Ruth’s responses were “characteristically universal.” Castelnuovo-Tedesco described Ruth as “mild and faithful,” adjectives he also used to describe his wife (Autobiography, 95).

Naomi and Ruth was premiered in Los Angeles in 1949 with the composer at the piano. The work was later orchestrated (Levin, 7). We can only speculate on what moved Castelnuovo-Tedesco that same year to complete a full oratorio based on Ruth, since that work remains unpublished. The choral setting of Ruth’s words “Entreat me not” that close the cantata was later published separately for solo voice.

Though written in 1949, the music is very accessible, i.e., melodic and based on harmonic tonality, not what we would normally associate with “modern” or “20th-century” music. Castelnuovo-Tedesco himself stated:

I have never believed in modernism, or in neoclassicism, or any other isms.
I believe that music is a form of language capable of progress and renewal…
Yet music should not discard what was contributed by preceding generations.

² Later works include the following:
The Queen of Sheba, a small cantata for women’s voices, op. 161, 1953, Belwin Mills Publishers;
Book of Jonah, biblical oratorio, op. 151, 1954, Belwin Mills Publishers;
The Fiery Furnace, a small cantata (based on the Book of Daniel), op. 183, 1958, Belwin Mills Publishers;
Tobit and the Angel, A Scotch Oratorio (based on the Apocryphal Book of Tobit), op. 204, 1964-65 (unpublished) (Rossi. 4-5).
Every means of expression can be useful and just, if it is used at the opportune moment...The simplest means are generally the best (Castelnuovo-Tedesco, "The Composer Speaks," quoted in Ricci, viii).

I will offer a few comments about the musical aspects of this work. This is a sample of the kind of technical analysis found in chapter 6 of this thesis and explanations of the terminology can be found in chapter 5. The narrator's voice is taken by a women's chorus for 1-1-7 (chap. 1 vv. 1-7). As the story is told, the music reflects changes in mood through key changes and variations in the rhythm and style of accompaniment under the voices (p. 8, m. [measure] 1, pp. 10 and 11, m. 1, for just three examples). Naomi's first solo, "Go, return" (1.8; p. 12, 3rd staff), is melodic and flowing. Her second solo, "Turn again" (1.11; letter F, p. 15, top) is more agitated and dissonant, both in the vocal line and accompaniment. The second time she sings these words (letter G, p. 16, 2nd staff), her melody is almost the same but sung in a higher key, with the chorus humming descending chromatic passages underneath her voice, all of which create a mood of increasingly intense emotion. Naomi reaches her highest pitch, a', on "Nay, my daughters" (1.13; 2 m. before letter H; p. 18, 3rd staff, m. 2) in a forte (loud) phrase marked allargando (broadening).

There is a dramatic shift in mood on the chorus's words "And Ruth said" (1.16; p. 21, top), where a progression of high chords ends in the bright key of C major (the only place in this work that this chord is heard), which then shifts immediately into A major (p. 21, letter K). This is the key for "Entreat me not" (1.16-17), sung in 3-part harmony by the women's chorus, with an arpeggiated accompaniment throughout. The effect of calm reflects the composer's view of Ruth as "mild and faithful." The key remains A major, but the ending is in the tonality of E major.

Castelnuovo-Tedesco gave Naomi more prominence through her solos, but the last word in this cantata belongs to Ruth. Even in such a short work, the characters of Naomi and Ruth (albeit sung by chorus) are differentiated musically. Naomi's music is filled with flats, while most of Ruth's contains sharps. Music that is flattened has the sense of being "lowered," while sharps have the effect of "raising" the pitches (ch. 5, p. 97). Naomi's few short solos take the listener through a gamut of emotion, from despair to encouragement to determination. Ruth's one "solo" projects mostly one mood, that of calm hope. Hearing these words through the music allows us to feel and hear these biblical passages in a new way, in the sense that the music generates greater empathy with the characters.

Though the cantata ends on the words "Entreat me not," (the only verses, incidentally, never omitted from any musical setting of the Scroll), in the biblical narrative these verses set the plot in motion, and are thus a beginning rather than an ending. Perhaps the composer wished to leave the door open for the listener to either imagine the rest, or to seek out the original biblical story.

We now go through that open door to begin our journey deeper into the Scroll of Ruth, through a textual and musical analysis of twelve diverse 19th and 20th century works.

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1 This is based on the piano vocal score, published by Mills Music, 1950 (now out of print but available at both the Library of Congress and the British Library).